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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [ASEC](#) [MARR](#) [AF](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: PRT URUZGAN: CHORA LEADERS SPEAK TO AFGHAN
INDEPENDENT HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Classified By: PolCouns Sara Rosenberry for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) On July 6, Chora district and tribal leaders met at the district center with a team from the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission investigating civilian losses in the June fight for Chora. Their message was clear and measured, devoid of the histrionics or exaggeration and blame for ISAF that have characterized statements made by Governor Monib, MP Abdul Khaliq Khan, and others. Chora's leaders made three main points. The fight took a heavy toll on civilians in the area but Chora leaders spoke only of total losses. Many ISAF-caused civilian losses resulted from the Taliban's tactic of fighting from positions where civilians were

present. Dutch forces must not be withdrawn from Chora as this would trigger Taliban re-infiltration into the area which will result in the cycle of violence repeating itself.
END SUMMARY

Background

¶2. (SBU) PRTOFF traveled via helicopter to Chora July 6 with a 4-member review team from the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC). The team traveled to Uruzgan to investigate civilian losses during the fight for Chora June 15-19 (along with several UNAMA representatives). UNAMA spoke to provincial government officials in Tarin Kowt and stayed at Governor Monib's compound but did not go along to Chora, citing security concerns. The AIHRC team and PRTOFF met with District Chief Mohammad Ibrahim and about 20 tribal leaders. We also spoke to doctors from the Chora clinic, select civilian victims, and the ANA deployed in Chora. The team had sent word they expected to also meet with District Chief of Police Mohammed Gul but he was not at the meeting.

The Civilian Toll

¶3. (SBU) The tribal leaders briefed the team on losses suffered by the local civilian population. They claimed that 87 civilians were killed and 50-60 compounds and approximately 2800 kg of wheat were destroyed. (Note: The number of civilian deaths is thought by Task Force Uruzgan analysts to be too high because it likely includes fighting age males dressed in civilian garb who were more likely combatants. End Note) They stated that most civilians were killed in houses destroyed by shelling from three sources: aerial bombardment from ISAF aircraft, artillery fired from the Dutch Panzer Howitzer in Tarin Kowt, and rockets fired by the Taliban's BM1 and BM12. Their stories were consistent with other accounts of the fighting known to PRTOFF. Local leaders recounted the events in a calm, matter-of-fact manner with little of the emotion or exaggeration that often accompanies shura discussions of highly charged topics. Their presentation stood in sharp contrast to petulant statements made by Governor Monib and other leaders such as Abdul Khaliq Khan, member of the Wolseji Jirga for Uruzgan who is from Chora. They accused ISAF of causing too many losses to local civilians with heavy-handed tactics, while simultaneously complaining bitterly of insufficient ISAF responses to defend Chora. They also want more offensive action against Taliban bases allegedly far removed from population centers.

Taliban Tactics Put Civilians in Harms Way

¶4. (SBU) Leaders declined to comment when asked by the team to say what part of the damage was caused by ISAF. Instead, they provided examples and spoke of locals killed by Taliban before and during the battle, such as the beheadings of two

KABUL 00002249 002 OF 003

militia members loyal to pro-GOA militia leaders in the days leading up to the Taliban's big attack June 16. They also talked vividly about Taliban tactics that purposely put civilians in danger of ISAF counterattacks (bombs and direct fire). For example, in the village of Qal'a-i-Ragh, one villager (Jano Aqa) said that Taliban fighting in and around his compound led ISAF to target the location, killing 18 members of his family and hospitalizing Aqa. In another case, as local residents were leaving the district center to return to their homes at the urging of local leaders, Taliban fired an RPG at a nearby Dutch armored vehicle, reportedly triggering renewed ISAF fire and causing residents to once again seek refuge and to refuse to return to their homes.

Dear Dutch, Please Don't Go

¶5. (SBU) During the shura, the leaders expressed their fear that the Taliban would likely attack Chora again this summer. They noted that Taliban had returned to their sanctuaries to the north in Gizab and to the south in the Baluchi pass, as well as in the Darefshan Valley to regroup. They implored the international troops to either bring security to this area or tell us to leave.

¶6. (C) At the end of the shura, while victims were talking to the human rights commission representatives, two tribal leaders approached PRTOFF to press the point further. They believed the Dutch were under pressure from President Karzai and Governor Monib to abandon the district center building (aka White Compound) where the Dutch camp out when in Chora and that this was the cause of Dutch plans to remove their troops, leaving only ANSF to maintain security. (Note: Dutch occupation of this USAID-funded government building has indeed been a bone of contention with the district chief and provincial governor, but the Dutch are willing to move if allowed to rent a nearby compound in reasonable condition for a reasonable price. End Note.) They argued that the ANSF were not yet strong enough in numbers or ability to repel the expected renewed Taliban push into the area. If the Dutch leave as they did in May, the tribal leaders assessed that the Taliban will inevitably try to take the district center once again, necessitating the Dutch to fight hard to regain lost ground, bombard the area and kill civilians, thus repeating the cycle. If the Dutch stayed, the tribal leaders argued, the cycle of violence remains broken and local residents can get back to normal life. Later in the week, Chora leaders reportedly sent a letter to President Karzai making similar arguments for retaining ISAF's presence in the vicinity.

¶7. (S/NF) The Dutch commander indeed had stated his intent to withdraw from Chora by July 12. However, on Saturday, July 7, the TFU command staff reversed this position and decided to maintain a permanent presence in Chora for the time being. The Dutch will continue to secure Chora while local police are trained and more Afghan forces are sought for the province and the Chora area in particular.

Iranian Training Bases in Gizab

¶8. (C/REL NATO/AUS) Local leaders claimed that people traveling through Chora from Gizab district told them that Iranians were training Taliban fighters in Gizab. One person well known to the PRT said the training camp was in Beirai (phonetic), a village in a Hazara area of Gizab, but the tribal leaders were unable to provide more specific information. (Note: Gizab has been under Taliban control since March 2006; there is no GOA presence there, and no Afghan or international forces have attempted to address this problem to date. End Note)

Comment

KABUL 00002249 003 OF 003

¶9. (S/NF) Chora leaders' decision to take a factual, pragmatic approach makes their story and pleas all the more credible. They seem to instinctively realize that it is not in their interest to complain loudly about civilian losses. And they are right. The political backlash this would cause here and in the Netherlands could force the Dutch military to end their current presence in the area, leaving residents once again vulnerable to Taliban attack. In fact, Chora leaders now are lobbying the Dutch to establish an international forward operating base in the area and have volunteered to provide land for the purpose. The Dutch are not inclined to do so, feeling that such a base would tax their resources beyond acceptable limits. However, they are beginning to consider the possibility of suggesting that the

GOA establish an ANA base there supported by Dutch trainers. Regardless of what action is taken, all seem to have realized that local residents and international troops alike are better off continuing to work together in Chora to keep the Taliban out.

WOOD